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# WHEN IS COMMUNION COMMUNION?

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*The assumption that the Eucharist is the "communion service" is not supported by evidence from the Gospels and from 1 Corinthians. The communion service consists of the observance of both a full fellowship meal and the Eucharist, each pointing to different aspects of Christian truth. This understanding is supported by Paul's argument concerning the practice (which occurred both in Israel's sacrifices and in pagan sacrifices) of offering a portion of a sacrifice while the remainder was eaten by the parties who experienced communion through the sacrifice.*

\* \* \*

## INTRODUCTION

ON the eve of his crucifixion, Jesus gathered his disciples into the upper room and instructed them about the relationship they had enjoyed together and how that relationship would be altered by his departure from them. He gave them activities which illustrated his ministry on their behalf and the benefits they would receive from their relationship with him. There were four activities that evening: the washing of feet (John 13:1-17), the fellowship meal (Luke 22:15-18), the eucharistic bread taken in the midst of the meal (Luke 22:19; 1 Cor 11:23-24), and the eucharistic cup taken after the supper (Luke 22:20; 1 Cor 11:25).

Christians have not agreed that all of these activities must be perpetuated. Those who observe only the eucharistic bread and the concluding cup still refer to such observances as the Communion Service. 1 Cor 10:15-22 is cited in support of this practice.<sup>1</sup> There Paul links blessing the cup and breaking the bread with communion (see especially v 16, "the cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ? The bread which we bless, is it

<sup>1</sup>E.g., F. W. Grosheide, *Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1953) 230; and R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of Paul's First and Second Epistles to the Corinthians* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1963) 409.

not the communion of the body of Christ?"). The expected answer is "yes." It is the purpose of this study to show that Paul was not referring to the Eucharist as constituting a full communion service. Rather Paul was referring to the meal out of which the elements of the Eucharist were to be taken. Further, it will be argued that the passage shows that neither the practice of the meal alone, nor the practice of the Eucharist alone, can constitute a full, biblical communion. Both must be practiced together by believers who recognize the truth that Christ vested in the symbols in order for the communion referred to in the passage to occur.

#### COMMUNION RESULTS FROM A SACRIFICIAL ACTIVITY

In 1 Cor 8:10 Paul answered the question about believers eating meat which had been offered to idols. Since the meat had been involved in demonic worship practices, it could potentially involve the eater in a communion with demons (10:20). Paul reminded the believers about the experiences of the people of Israel (10:3-4), who became involved in idolatry (10:5-7) through eating and drinking. God had judged them and had left documentation of their failure in order to warn other believers not to engage in idolatry. In the midst of this discussion, Paul addresses the mature believers (10:15) and urges them to discern that the same laws of worship which function in the sacrificial system of Israel (10:18) and in the idolatrous sacrifices of the Gentiles (10:19-21) also function in the believers' communion meal (10:16-17).

#### COMMUNION IS A REAL RELATIONSHIP

The word *κοινωνία* is used four times in this passage. It means a partnership or community of persons who have something in common.<sup>2</sup> Three partnerships are described in this passage: (1) the believers' partnership with the body and blood of Christ, (2) the Israelite partnership with the altar, and (3) the Gentile partnership with demons. That these are not imagined identifications but real relationships is proven by the impossibility of a believer belonging to two opposing partnerships (10:21) and by the jealousy of God which is provoked against any who would attempt to do so (10:22). The wilderness judgment already cited (10:3-7) documents how real these partnerships are to God. He responds to individuals and treats them according to the terms of the partnership to which they belong. Blessing flows from him to those who are partners with Christ, and judgment falls upon those who are partners with demons.

<sup>2</sup>BAGD, 438-39; J. Schattenmann, "Fellowship," *NIDNTT* 1, 643-44; and Friedrich Hauck, "κοινωνία," *TDNT* 3 (1965) 805.

Therefore, the communion or partnership which Paul is discussing is a serious and vital relationship involving the partners in binding relationships that determine God's dealings with them. It involves much more than a subjective feeling or an individualistic mental attitude toward God. Communion is a relationship with consequences which are shared by the partners.

#### COMMUNION OCCURS THROUGH THE ACTIVITY OF THE PARTNERS

Communion is not found in the cup or bread. The physical elements tangibly express truths which the partners celebrate by blessing and eating. The bread and the cup contain no mystical or spiritual value. Paul makes this clear by comparison, pointing out that neither the idol nor the substance offered as a sacrifice to the idol "is anything" (10:19). Nevertheless, the pagan idol represented a demonic spirit who did indeed receive the sacrifices offered (10:20) and united as a partner with the worshippers. Likewise, through the Israelite altar Jehovah received the sacrifices offered and united himself as a partner with those who ate the appointed portion of the sacrifice.

Communion is created through the active participation of the worshippers. The Israelites ate a portion of the sacrificial substance and celebrated their partnership with God. Believers could become partners with demons by eating and drinking portions of the things that had been offered upon the pagan altar (10:20). The believers would join in partnership with Christ by blessing the cup and breaking the bread (10:16). This breaking involved eating from the loaf of bread (10:17)<sup>3</sup> as illustrated by the specific reference to the eating of sacrifices in Israel (10:18). Thus, communion is produced by the active participation of the partners as they eat and drink the prepared elements.

#### COMMUNION REQUIRES THE EATING OF PREPARED BREAD

Communion occurs when the believer eats bread which has been set apart through the symbolic action originated by Christ. In a sense derived from the terminology of 1 Corinthians 10, the bread has been "sacrificed." Paul stresses that when believers are breaking the bread in a communion service, they are all sharing out of *one* bread (10:17). Because it is *one* bread the many individuals are "*one* body." The significance of the oneness of the bread is illustrated in the sacrifices of Israel (10:18) and in the sacrifices to idols (10:20-21). It is then applied to the question of eating meat offered to idols (10:24-33).

<sup>3</sup>Grosheide (*First Corinthians*, 233) says, "Each member eats a piece of the loaf and in that way partakes of the loaf in its entirety."

Certain Israelite sacrifices required that the worshipers eat a portion of the offering. The sacrifice was divided; part was put on the altar and the other part was eaten by the worshipers.<sup>4</sup> The same animal thus bridged the distance between the altar and Israelite. The benefits given by God because of what was happening to the part laid on the altar were transmitted to the one eating because both parts belonged to one sacrifice.<sup>5</sup> Thus, the blessings of the propitiated God were made the possession of the obedient eater and he was recognized as being a partner with Jehovah.

The same principle worked in the pagan sacrificial system.<sup>6</sup> What had occurred when part of the sacrificial animal was offered to the idol affected the rest of the carcass that was sold in the market. Because one part had been sanctified as a sacrifice, the rest of the carcass was potentially able to involve anyone who ate of it in a partnership with the demon. The potential of such association was latent in every portion of meat which had been involved in idol sacrifices. This potential was the danger Paul warned believers to avoid.

The similar dual usage of the sacrificial animal in both pagan and Israelite worship systems also applies to the believer's communion. Jesus had used the same ("one") bread for both the meal and the eucharistic bread. He had used the same cup (Luke 22:17-20) for the meal and for the eucharistic cup after supper. The bread could constitute a valid communion for the believers as they ate the meal because a portion of it would be offered to God in a eucharistic thanksgiving. Thus the communion meal is sanctified by the eucharistic offering which is specifically designated by Christ as a symbol of his sacrifice. Because of this principle, Paul later argues (11:20-34) that when the believers desecrated the supper it was impossible for them to avoid unworthily eating the eucharistic bread which followed the meal.<sup>7</sup> The same bread was used for both parts of the service. For biblical communion to occur, believers must observe both of the activities which Christ prescribed that involved the use of the "one" bread.

<sup>4</sup>Cf. Lev 7:15-18. Not only priests are in view; there were sacrifices from which the offerer also ate.

<sup>5</sup>Cf. Lev 7:19-21. The portion eaten belongs to the Lord and is part of the one sacrifice being made.

<sup>6</sup>Hauck, "κοινός," 799-800; and James L. Boyer, *For a World Like Ours* (Winona Lake: BMH, 1971) 96.

<sup>7</sup>While the order of events is different than that found in Israel or pagan rites (since the "sacrifice" followed the meal), the principle of identification between the two parts remains the same.

## COMMUNION OCCURS AS PARTNERS EXERCISE DISCERNMENT

Communion does not occur unless the actions are performed in conscious knowledge of the truths being symbolized. Mechanical, thoughtless participation, even in the proper activities, does not create communion. It has already been shown that communion is not found in the physical substance of the altar or sacrifices (10:19) but in the activity of the worshiper as he eats and drinks the elements. Applying this truth to the question of eating meat offered to idols, Paul told the believers that they could eat any meat sold in the market (10:25); they could attend meals with unbelievers and eat anything placed before them (10:27), and, if they were certain they would not be seen by a weaker brother, they could even eat a meal within the idol's temple (8:10)! But only believers who had "knowledge" (8:7) could exercise such freedom. This knowledge was that the meat offered to idols was undefiled because idols are "nothing" (8:4). But if a Christian did not have this knowledge and believed that eating meat offered to idols involved participation in idolatry, for him to eat was sin (8:7-11). It would be sinful for a "strong" believer (8:12) to encourage such a weak brother to eat. If anyone (even non-believers) raised the issue, the believer was not to eat the questionable meat (10:28). In all of these applications, Paul consistently shows that knowledge, which governs the conscience and controls one's perception, is the key to proper action. The individual's discernment makes the meat either an acceptable social occasion or a participation in idolatry.

In 1 Corinthians 10 Paul requires that communion participants perceive in the elements the benefits secured for them by the blood and body of Christ (10:16). In the one loaf of bread from which they all share, they are to discern the relationship which binds all of them into one body (10:17). Absence of such discernment not only negates the possibility of communion but also brings the condemnation of God.

In correcting the abuses which the Corinthians had introduced into their observances of the Lord's Supper (11:17-34), Paul argued that the misuse of the meal which resulted in one being hungry and another being drunken was actually a despising of the church of God (11:21-22). He described eating and drinking unworthily as a failure to discern the body of believers (11:29).<sup>8</sup> Because of this failure, many were guilty (11:27) and were being chastened by the Lord (11:30-32). Failure to properly discern the truths symbolized had turned their

<sup>8</sup>Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Theology* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1981) 759.

"communion" into discipline (11:34). The solution was to examine themselves (11:28) and to cease eating and drinking the elements of the supper in a manner unworthy of the truth being symbolized.

COMMUNION OCCURS WHEN THE PARTNERS OBSERVE  
BOTH THE MEAL AND THE EUCHARIST

Paul showed that in both Israelite and pagan worship practices communion involved two activities using the same carcass—one portion was used for a sacrifice and the other portion was eaten by the worshipers. Not every meal in an Israelite home was a communion. Only those meals which involved eating a portion of the sacrificed animal were valid communions.

Not every piece of meat sold in the markets of Corinth could potentially engage those who ate it in partnership with demons. Only those pieces that were part of a carcass used in sacrifice were questionable. Likewise, in Christian communion the taking of the eucharistic cup and the eucharistic bread apart from participation in the meal does not satisfy the requirements of this passage or constitute a valid communion.

Every time the Eucharist is specifically mentioned in the NT it is linked to a meal.<sup>9</sup> All four gospels declare that Jesus led his disciples through a meal in the upper room. The other events of the evening are all associated with that meal. Paul spoke of a meal as the Lord's Supper (11:20) and claimed that the authority for the practice came directly from the Lord (11:23). It is the testimony of Scripture that Jesus took elements from the meal when he commanded that the bread and the cup be observed as a memorial of his death.

Some believers today do not share a meal together from which they might take the elements for the Eucharist. They only observe the Eucharist and call it the "Lord's Supper," assuming that Paul has the Eucharist in mind in 1 Cor 10:16–17, 21. Four observations from the passage suggest that these verses refer to the communion meal, not the Eucharist.

First, although Paul described the cup as one of "blessing" (εὐλογίας, 10:16),<sup>10</sup> he did not say that it was part of the Eucharist. Neither in the gospel accounts nor in Paul's discussion of the Eucharist in 1 Cor 11:23–34 is the verb "to bless" (εὐχαριστέω) used to describe the cup. Both Matthew and Mark mention that Jesus "blessed" the eucharistic bread, not the cup. Luke records two activities of Jesus

<sup>9</sup>Matt 26:26–29; Mark 14:22–25; Luke 22:14–20; 1 Cor 10:16–22 (cf. "table"); 11:20–34.

<sup>10</sup>There are a few manuscripts which read εὐχαριστίας instead of εὐλογίας (F. G. 365, and a few others). But these witnesses are late and so few that this reading cannot seriously be considered to be original.

involving the cup on the table before him. The text says that Jesus gave thanks (εὐχαριστήσας) for the cup when it was used during the meal (Luke 22:17), but not when it was used for the "Eucharist" (Luke 22:20). The focus of Jesus' activity when he used the cup during the meal was upon the future when all of the promised blessings of God's covenants would be fulfilled on earth. The eucharistic cup, however, looks back and memorializes the shed blood that secured for believers a participation in new covenant blessings. Although the same cup was used for the meal and for the Eucharist, Paul's reference to "the" cup of blessing (1 Cor 10:16) shows that he was referring to the meal cup.

Second, the bread being broken is not specifically identified as the eucharistic bread. The activity of breaking bread is done by all of those who are involved in a communion observance and their sharing of one loaf constitutes them as one body (1 Cor 10:17). Breaking bread is a common phrase in Scripture and usually means to eat a meal.<sup>11</sup> That this is the meaning in 1 Cor 10:16-17, 21 is clearly implied in the context.

Third, the partnership with the body of Christ that occurred when the bread was broken does not need to be understood in terms of the Eucharist. In the Eucharist, Jesus specified that the bread was the symbol of his body "which is given for you" (Luke 22:19). Thus, the eucharistic bread focuses on the physical body of Jesus. But the partnership which occurred in the breaking of bread in 1 Cor 10:16 is defined as the unity of the individual sharers in one body (10:17). This relationship among believers as one body is the subject of 1 Corinthians 11-14. When the believers in Corinth abused the eating of the meal they were violating this truth which is symbolized in the meal. They were "despising the church of God" (11:22) by "not discerning the body" (11:29).

The Scriptures speak of two bodies of Christ, the body of his flesh and the body of his followers. Both bodies are real and both, as seen above, are symbolized at different times in the course of the communion service. The eucharistic bread looks back to memorialize the crucifixion of Christ in his human body. The meal bread focuses on the unity of believers which forms the earthly body through which the Head, Jesus Christ, now continues his work among men. In 10:17

<sup>11</sup>David R. Plaster, *Ordinances: What Are They?* (Winona Lake: BMH, 1985) 81-83, 132-34; Homer A. Kent, Jr., "A Historical Investigation of the Agape" (unpublished Th.M. thesis: Grace Theological Seminary, 1952) 33; Johannes Behm, "κλάω," *TDNT* 3 (1965) 729-30; F. F. Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of Acts* (NICNT: Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981) 79, 408; R. Lee Cole, *Love Feasts* (London: Charles H. Kelly, 1916) 50; and J. F. Keating, *The Agape and the Eucharist in the Early Church* (London: Methuen, 1901) 42-44.



Paul points to the body of Christ which is celebrated by the meal bread, not the one which is memorialized in the Eucharist.

Finally, Paul employs the word "partakers" to describe both those who participate in communion by breaking the bread (10:17) and those who cannot be "partakers of the table of the Lord" while also being partakers "of the table of demons" (10:21). Thus Paul describes the breaking of bread as involving the table of the Lord. The word "table" (τράπεζα) suggests eating a meal, not eating a single morsel.<sup>12</sup> Jesus used "table" to identify the betrayer when he said, "the hand of him that betrayeth me is with me at the table" (Luke 22:21). Since Judas left the Upper Room immediately after receiving the morsel (John 13:30), and since the morsel was given *before* Jesus instituted the Eucharist, then Judas was involved in the table meal but did not eat the Eucharist.<sup>13</sup> The second reference Jesus made to a table (Luke 22:30) expressed a promise that the disciples would "eat and drink at my table in my kingdom." That future event is a meal, the Marriage Supper of the Lamb (Rev 19:9), and the descriptions of that meal encourage believers to expect a banquet.

To summarize: (1) neither the cup nor the bread are specifically called eucharistic in the text; (2) the cup is identified as one of blessing, a description more characteristic of the meal cup than of the memorial cup; (3) the act of breaking bread together constituted the eaters as a unified body (1 Cor 10:16–17); and (4) the activity of eating the bread is described in 1 Cor 10:21 as being a partaker of the Lord's "table." Therefore, the activity Paul specifies as constituting communion is not the Eucharist alone. Rather, the eucharistic bread and cup are celebrated in union with the meal, the dual usages of the same bread and cup portray the symbolism instituted in the Upper Room and discussed by Paul in 1 Corinthians. It reminds the partakers of their partnership with God and one another.

#### CONCLUSION

Communion is a partnership with God and other believers that is created by the application of the ministry of Christ to the individual believer. The benefits of this partnership are detailed in the promises of the NT and are made secure for believers by his sacrificial death. This truth is celebrated in the eucharistic bread and cup. The present and future participation in these benefits is celebrated in the Lord's meal. As believers thoughtfully eat and drink both the meal and the Eucharist, they are celebrating and strengthening their partnership with God and with each other. Such obedience brings blessing to believers and glory to God. This is communion.

<sup>12</sup>BAGD, 824; and Leonhard Goppelt, "τράπεζα," *TDNT* 8 (1972) 209–15.

<sup>13</sup>Robert L. Thomas and Stanley N. Gundry, *A Harmony of the Gospels* (Chicago: Moody, 1978) 210–13.